

The first winter plumage of the female Tufted Duck.

On page 301 of the *Handbook* it is stated that the plumage of the first winter female can only be distinguished when some juvenile body feathers are retained. As the belly and vent of juveniles have a barred appearance the first winter female shown by the Drs. Harrison (centre of plate 1 of their paper) appears to resemble a bird still retaining some of its juvenile feathers.

Plumage comparisons between female Tufted Duck and female Ring-necked Duck (Aythya collaris).

From perusal of three female Tufted shown in the top two pictures of plate 88 of the *Handbook* it will be seen that there is (from left to right) a white bellied, a mottled bellied and a dark bellied bird (the last is described as a dark type). It is useful to compare these with Mendall's² illustrations of a series of female Ring-necked showing progressive plumage changes (plate 2, "*The Ring-necked Duck in the Northeast*") in which the belly of the female changes from light to dark between April and August. Thus, there appears to be a similarity in the underparts of these closely related species.

Mendall says of the Ring-necked Duck's plumage "by late May the white lower breast and belly of the female becomes extensively mottled with brown. Throughout June this mottling becomes more noticeable . . . The brown colouration of the underparts which replaces area previously white or grayish is due primarily to plumage wear rather than to the acquisition of new feathers during molt".

Conclusion.

In the late summer and autumn I have frequently seen female Tufted with mottled underparts similar to the September killed birds depicted by the Drs. Harrison in their paper but, in view of plumage descriptions in the *Handbook*, have not regarded them as unusual.

Without further explanations from these authors it is difficult to understand how their specimens can be regarded as varieties of a very unusual type.

References :—

- ¹ Harrison, James M. and Jeffery G. "*On varieties of the Tufted Duck, with an account of an unrecorded type of variation*" Bull. B.O.C., Vol. 80 pp. 25-28, 1960.
- ² Mendall, Howard L. "*The Ring-necked Duck in the Northeast*" University of Maine Bull. Vol. LX, No. 16, June 20, 1958.
- ³ Witherby, H. F. *et al.* "*The Handbook of British Birds*" (Vol. 3), London.

Further remarks on Female Plumages of the Tufted Duck

by DRs. JAMES M. & JEFFERY G. HARRISON

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We are grateful to Mr. E. H. Gillham for commenting upon our paper (*antea* Bull. B.O.C., 80:25-28) and in particular for stressing the dark type of summer plumage in the adult female. We should have discussed this point and are now availing ourselves of the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Gillham states that the first winter female is only to be distinguished from the adult female when some juvenile body feathers are retained, as the belly and vent of juveniles have a barred appearance. We are in

agreement with this statement and have confirmed it on specimens of known age in our collections. In fact, we have three birds from the same brood, two of which are the accepted type of juvenile presenting the barred belly and vent, while the third bird, the centre specimen in our plate in the paper referred to, shows in addition to the normal *subdued* barring of belly and vent, the coarse and more generally distributed flecking to which our paper refers and which is quite different in character and extends onto the breast as well. These three birds are now illustrated in the accompanying plate.

With regard to the bird shown on the left of our original plate, which Mr. Gillham infers is in normal summer plumage, we would point out that according to the *Handbook*¹, this plumage is acquired between March and June. But here we have a bird which was photographed in life on 13th August, 1959, when it was caught and ringed in a duck trap; at that time it showed minimal dark flecking and, when killed by a fox on 4th September i.e. twenty-two days later, this flecking had become much more marked *whilst actually moulting into winter plumage*, the moult being confirmed when the bird was skinned, and this we consider unusual.

With regard to the bird shown on the right of our plate, as this specimen was not prepared by us and was not sexed, beyond showing it as another example, we cannot comment further except to point out that not only are new white feathers developing in the breast, but also new *dark* ones, and this specimen is also moulting into winter plumage.

We maintain that the character under discussion comes into line with such other homologous recurring characters in the *Anatidae* as the white chin spot, the white undertail-coverts and the white facial band at the base of the bill, all of which are seen in this species.

The fact that similar plumage variants occur in the Ring-necked Duck, *Aythya collaris*, of course supports our view that this is of phylogenetic significance. However, we find in the Tufted Duck which we have discussed that this is due to a moult and not to wear. That such individuals have been observed frequently, does not detract from the probable significance of this plumage and since, as is shown by an examination of our specimens, the condition of coarse flecking is occasioned by a simultaneous autumnal moult of both white feathers of the winter and a generation of new brown feathers, this plumage can only doubtfully be included as a normal adult female plumage phase.

The more attention that is given to these transient and variant characters in the *Anatidae*, the more importance can be attached to them, and until they have been described and discussed and their significance assessed they are, we believe still best referred to as unusual.

Reference:—

¹ *The Handbook of Brit. Birds*, 1939. III, 300.

Remarks on the Flower-pecker, *Dicaeum agile* (Tickell)

by MR. H. G. DEIGNAN

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Dr. Finn Salomonsen has recently (Amer. Mus. Novit., No. 1991, 1960) reviewed certain flower-peckers, among them *Dicaeum agile* and its relatives. Since his conclusions are in many ways different from those